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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to consider how two distinct research methodologies differently structure for study the inputs, transactions, and outcomes of adult literacy programs. It is suggested that the appropriateness of a methodology for the study of adult literacy programs be determined by assessing the extent to which the methodology speaks to the information needs and context complexity involved. Questions invclved in discussing information needs include "What is adult literacy?" "How does an adult acquire basic literacy?" and "What are the teaching variables and their impact on gaining literacy?" Factors to be considered in looking at the contextual complexity of adult literacy are said to be the time in treatment, personal problems, and programing factors. Two research methodologies are discussed as they apply to research in adult basic education: conventional experimental and ethnography. Ethnographic research is suggested as having more possibilities for research on adult literacy, since the goal is to discover new variables and new relationships. The emphasis in experimental research is said to be on controlling and manipulating variables, a seemingly impossible situation in adult basic education programs. (MKM)

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ETHNOGRAPHY AND ADULT LITERACY PROGRAMS: MEETING INFORMATION NEEDS AND CONTEXT COMPLEXITY

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The purpose of this paper is to consider how two distinct research methodologies differently structure for study the inputs, transactions and outcomes of adult literacy programs. It will be suggested that the appropriateness of a methodology for the study of adult literacy programs be determined by assessing the extent to which the methodology speaks to the information needs and context complexity involved.

INFORMATION NEEDS

People who attend Adult Basic Education (ABE) programs may be seeking to learn to write their name, learn basic word identification skills, or to review test taking skills before taking a high school equivalency examination. In considering the most viable methodology for researching variables influencing effectiveness of ABE progeams, focus here will be on the adult beginning reader (ABR) in non-institutional settings.

ABE students differ in ages (16-80), lifestyle, level of employment, home and educational background, cognitive level and style, and attitude toward the pursuit of education. ABE programs vary in organizational patterns, materials, methods and background of staff (Cook, 1977). Perhaps the one factor common to most ABE programs is the concern for the high dropout rate. The information on why this rate is high may not be complete.

A recent statewide survey of students enrolled in ABE programs in Virginia indicate that 39% of the students drop out before the 19th hour of instruction. This dropout rate has increased to 60% before the 39th hour of instruction and to 90% by the 99th hour of instruction. The fact that those who stay to at least 100 hours tend to be making progress has apparently led many ABE teachers to conclude that if students would just stay they would learn. While students state that problems with work,

transportation, and health are reasons for leaving, it is likely that perceived or actual rate of learning plays a role in the high dropout rate.

For example, directors of ABE programs, especially in urban areas where a variety of programs exist, recognize the fact that many dropouts are "drop-ins". These are the students who go from program to program apparently looking for a learning situation which meets their learning and affective needs. There is a need to examine how effectively ABE programs provide for the learning needs of adult students.

Claims for improved materials (Cook, 1977) and methods in ABE have not been tied to improved achievement. Little progress has been made in the last few decades in improving the teaching of literacy. Kavale and Lindsey (1977) suggest three reasons for this: 1) descriptions of adults and ABE programs are misleading; 2) programs do not "empirically justify" the approaches used; and 3) little information is offered about the adult beginning reader's reading process.

In-depth descriptions of ABE programs and students are available. Perhaps the most extensive study in this country of adult literacy programs is that by Mezirow, Darkenwald and Knox (1975). These investigators used a system labeled "synchronic induction" in which teams of observers spent eight months taking field notes and interviewing students and staff of ABE centers in six United States cities. Observers' field notes were evaluated by a supervising sociologist and when new patterns were noted by one observer, observers in other areas were alerted to investigate these factors. In addition, these investigators conducted two national surveys of ABE teachers and directors. This report provides a highly recognizable global picture of ABE programs. A series of suggestions provided at the end of this report reflect generalizations about observed interactions and organizational factors.

What is missing, however, is a clear global model of the interactions which would provide opportunity to speculate further about the relation of specific student, teacher and program variables. The broad information base and perspective provided by Mezirow, Darkenwald and Knox is not analyzed from the perspective of other ABE research or theoretical frameworks.

This may be because, as Knowles (1979, p. 38) explains, a distinctive adult learning theory is only now "evolving". Kavale and Lindsey (1977) catalogue references clarifying differences between adult and child physiology, learning history, reaction times, attitudes, and psychological characteristics. Thus, it would seem inappropriate to turn to learning theories based on children to analyze research results on adults. However, these same child-based theories provide useful frameworks for comparative analysis of observed adult behaviors and a base for generating new adult learning models.

As in learning theory, theories of reading have been supported by or derived largely from proficient adult or child-based research. These models may not hold up with the adult beginning reader. For example, Boraks (1978) has suggested there is a difference in pattern of use of graphic, phonemic, semantic, and syntactic cues of children and adults. An additional concern in using existing child-based reading process models, is that one major variable recognized as operating in both child and adult learning-to-read process (the teacher-student interaction) has not been incorporated fully into theoretical models of children's reading (Entwisle, 1971).

Basic information about ABE is also needed. Cook concludes in her history of adult literacy that a definition of adult literacy is still lacking. Although Sticht (1972) and Bormuth (1975) have provided "preliminary and partial" frameworks for defining and assessing literacy, the very parameters of the definition "literacy" and "adult" are apparently not satisfactorily established.

Under the heading of need to know, then, is the basic question "what is adult literacy"; the important learning process questions "how does an ABR acquire basic literacy"; the teaching process questions "what variables impact on gaining literacy"; and the theoretical question "what models are viable for considering the interaction of these variables?"

CONTEXTUAL COMPLEXITY

It cannot be said that we know very little about adult literacy, but are doing well anyway. The average person entering an adult literacy program and staying for 100 hours tends to score at least a year higher in reading achievement tests. However, the reality at least in Virginia is that few (less than 10%) stay this long,and nationwide - those that do come into an adult program represent but a small proportion (one to twenty per cent) of the target group (Mezirow, 1975; Kavale and Lindsey, 1977). The average ABE student then is exposed to less instruction in an ABE setting than a grade school child who has been in school for one month. Since only a small percentage of ABR's come into adult centers, and a smaller proportion remain, the context of adult illiteracy is larger than the program context itself.

The diversity of adult and program characteristics described earlier create a complex situation. Add to this the fluid nature of the population in the ABE center, (dropouts, drop-ins, erratic attendance) and the result is a fascinating but not terribly stable context.

Moreover, what Carini calls "the multiplicity of internal reciprocities" which occur in a learning situation are difficult to isolate and observe, and it is these reciprocities which are believed to constitute the phenomena's integrity (Carini, 1975).

The "assign, explain, question, drill" teaching style described as existing in most ABE programs, reveals only the surface of the teaching-learning interaction.

Time in treatment (i.e., instruction) is short; personological and programatic factors are many and the range of the factors (such as age, education, etc.) is varied. The information base which might enable a researcher to delimit or control for specific factors by delineating parameters of meaningful categories of subject characteristics is just developing.

The researcher interested in adding to the ABE information base in determining both research question and methodology must seek an approach which does recognize and accomodate this complex and uncharted context.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES

A variety of research methodologies are available for dealing with the needed information base and context complexity described above. Two methodologies will be discussed here: conventional experimental and ethnography. Experimental or quasi-experimental research generally requires control and manipulation of input and output variables. The goal of control is to reduce and isolate variables so that any changes observed or relationships found can be attributed clearly to these pre-identified and isolated variables.

Ethnographic research requires the observation of variables in the natural setting. Important variables and their possible relationship are not pre-identified and not controlled. The goal is to discover new variables and new relationships. Carini's (1975) emphasis on noting coherence (reciprocal moments of relatedness), durability (persistence) and integrity (recurrent patterns) of phenomena defines the observational structure of ethnography.

In experimental research it is the orienting framework or theoretical base of the study which indicates the structure (relatedness) and pattern of behavior to be observed.

Guba (1978) has contrasted the main components of conventional, experimental and naturalistic ethnographic inquiry in chart form. (See page 7.)

This chart emphasizes the fact that key contrasting elements between experimental and naturalistic ethnography inquiry concern control. Observation framework, input variables (context, personological) and output variables (criterion, dependent test) must be controlled in experimental research. A valid data base for applying a framework, as well as a stable situation in which controls can be realistically applied, therefore, are required for conventional, experimental research. In ABE programs, as described earlier, the context is not stable, important variables have not been isolated or categorized and viable theoretical frameworks are just emerging.

In addition, the very basic assumption of an experiemntal design is that population involved in the study be representative (i.e., not systematically different from the population as a whole). It is very difficult if not impossible to assure representativeness in non-institutional ABE programs. Since target and attending population may differ, only a small proportion of the target population has been tapped; and the relation of target to attending populations has not been verified. Moreover, potential for control of attending population's participation is minimal.

The independent nature of the adult and the fact that adult beginning readers have not been assimilated into institutional patterns of disinterested compliance (perhaps, fortunately) make even the single session approach to collection of data difficult. Recently in conducting a brief experiment to determine if adults would learn a specific concept more efficiently in a one-to-one or group setting, I found adults' willingness to participate

Some Basic Differences Between Conventional and Naturalistic Inquiry[1]

	FORMS OF INQUIRY	
	Conventional Inquiry	Naturalistic Inquiry
Philosophical base	Logical positivism	Phenomenology
Inquiry paradigm	Experimental physics	Ethnography; investigative journalism
Purpose	Verification	Discovery
Stance	Reductionist	Expansionist
Framework/design	Preordinate/fixed	Emergent/variable
Style	Intervention	Selection
Reality manifold	Singular	Multiple
Value Structure	Singular	Pluralistic
Setting	Laboratory	Nature
Context	Unrelated	Relevant
Conditions	Controlled	Invited interference
Treatment	Stable	Variable
Scope	Molecular	Molar
Methods	Objective - in sense of inter-subjective agreement	Objective - in sense of factual/confirmable

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1 Guba, E. Toward a Methodology of Naturalistic Inquiry in Educational Evaluation.

greater than willingness to tolerate controlled experimental conditions. Random assignment was not possible; only 60% of the planned population were in attendance. Several ABE adults insisted on skimming materials prior to instruction, many interrupted to request information, socialize and/or request cigarettes or coffee breaks. The ABE adult is extremely sensitive, wary and curious about all phases of a protocol, making systematic application difficult. Since this very behavior may be the telling factor in learning, it might also be innapropriate to, without further study, create restricted situations where these behaviors are eliminated.

It is not suggested here that where requirements of conventional experimental methodology can be met, this is the best approach. There are limitations to the power of the experimental approach. The power of any research methodology depends upon the question formulated and the context in which the question will be addressed. Mitroff and Bonama (1978) synthesis of Feyerabend's concern about the single orientation in conventional experimental research brings out a relevant limitation to experimental research in the ABE setting.

Feyerabend argues that when a single theory provides the framework for data collection and analysis, data will tend to conform to "the very theory it should instead be challenging" (Mitroff and Bonama, 1978, p. 249).

It is suggested then that theories are needed to analyze and help synthesize information on the ABR. It is not suggested that a single theory is needed or even desirable, for as noted above a single framework might tend to support itself as opposed to supporting an understanding of the phenomena being studied. There is also as Mitroff and Bonama (1978) suggest the type III error or "the possibility of solving the wrong problem when one should have solved the right problem" (p. 248). The limitations of the experimental method in examining reciprocal interaction in the

teaching/learning situation has led other researchers to suggest the need to reconceptualize research on teaching. Winnie and Marx (1977) emphasizing the importance of the "bidirectional" relationship between teacher and student behavior, and call for research designs which can "accomodate the realities of the classroom system instead of forcing into factorial designs sets of teacher or student behavior, which can never be truly orthagonal" (p. 676). Simplifying and controlling variables clarifies the research design but does not always lend to improved understanding of the context studied.

Ethnography provides an opportunity for researchers working in ABE, a relatively new field of systematic research endeavors, to start by placing effort on problem definitions and problem statements so that Type III errors can be avoided. It should be possible, at the same time, to ask these "right" questions about adult beginning readers within increasingly more defined (not prescribed) perspectives. Where experimental research may require controls and assumptions which cannot be accomodated within the ABE setting, an open program evaluation approach may be requiring too little. There is a need to establish evaluation perspectives and findings in terms of related literature and available or tentatively generated theoretical frameworks. Frameworks for evaluating ABE Programs which include steps for describing program, audience, identifying issues, developing evaluation designs, collecting, interpreting and disseminating information (Grotleuschen, Gooler and Knox, 1976; Couvert, 1979) might be adapted to include establishment of perspectives as an initial step and interpretation of final data in light of related literature and available or generated theories. Specific learning-to-read process questions and information needs relating to ABE programs and ABRs can be more appropriately addressed with the systematic ethnographic (naturalistic inquiry) approach described by Guba (1978) and Stufflebeam (1974). This approach would accomodate the complexity of the ABE setting.

Summary

Research in ABE which has been largely descriptive need not be totally reoriented toward experimental research to satisfy calls for "genuine research" (Versluys, 1977), or "statistically-treated data" (Kavale and Lindsey, 1977). If variables cannot be definitively accounted for and controlled and if the process is both fluid and all-important; research can only be "genuine" when it addresses these realities.

In outlining information needs and the context complexity inherent in ABE programs, the goal here was to emphasize that in planning and evaluating research -- when the question of application of appropriate controls is raised -- that the emphasis will be on appropriate rather than on control.

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